NEW
# NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 385. Price, Five Cents.

# THE SECRET ORDER OF ASSOCIATED CROOKS

OR

## THE CONFEDERATED CRIMINAL TRUST

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

Hans Pretzel shot into the air over Nick's head, dropped upon the very edge of the rock, and with a shriek, rolled over into the abyss beneath.

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No. 385. NEW YORK, May 14, 1904. Price Five Cents.

# The Secret Order of Associated Crooks;

## OR,

# THE CONFEDERATED CRIMINAL TRUST.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

## CHAPTER I.

### KNOCKED OUT IN ONE ROUND.

"It's Pommery Sec."

"Well, what of it?"

"Ah! g'wan, Pete. You're dead slow."

"Well, s'posen I am—what of it? S'posen it is Pommery—what of it?"

"Ain't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"What Pommery's doin' since he got back from his trip around the world?"

"No."

"Well, it ain't a sure thing, but all the same it's said that he's rubberin' for Nick Carter."

"Gee!" said Pete Morgan, with a leer in his eyes. Then he stuck his tongue in his cheek and grinned, while he added:

"Wouldn't that jar you?"

"More'n likely enough it's true," said Chris Conners.

"Never on your doorplate. 'Tain't in the register, Chris. Do you s'pose he'd be hanging around doin' the same old odd jobs he used to do if he was workin' for Carter? Do you s'pose he'd be holdin' horses, smashin' baggage, runnin' errands, blackin' boots, sellin' papers and monkeyin' after pennies and nickels if he was workin' for Nick Carter? Say, Chris, I've had a lot of thoughts about Phil Pommery since I've knowed him, but I never did size him up for a natural born idiot."

"'Sh-h-h! Here he comes," warned Chris. "I'll jest stroll away and let you talk to him. Maybe you kin get something out of him. I tried it yesterday and couldn't."

Philip Pommery, or Pommery Sec, or Fiz, as he was

familiarly known among the boys with whom he had consorted ever since he could remember, crossed the street slowly, toward the spot where Pete and Chris were standing, and he permitted himself to smile when he saw that they had discovered his approach, and had separated.

He pretended that he had not seen Pete, who waited for him, and was in the act of passing when his name was called:

"I say, Fiz, where you goin'?" said Pete, as Phil was in the act of passing him.

"Nowhere. Want to fall in, Pete?"

"Smart, ain't you? Eh?"

"Sure. Why don't you try to be? Maybe you couldn't; but you could try."

"Say, Fiz, is that true what I heard about you?"

"Maybe. What was it?"

"Heard you was workin' for Carter."

"Who?"

"Carter."

"Who's he?"

"Nick Carter, the detective. Are you?"

"Sure."

"Honest Injun, now, are you workin' for Nick Carter, Fiz?"

"Yep. I'm his private secretary. Office hours, two to four, A. M. Come up and see me."

"No jokin', Fiz; are you?"

For answer Phil stuck his thumbs under his arms, threw back his head, and strutted up and down the curb in front of his companion. His tongue was in his cheek and his eyes were sparkling with mischief, and altogether he looked what he was—the ideal personification of an independent street arab of New York.

He wore a leather cap which was at least two sizes too small for him, and that was set at a jaunty angle on the side of his head, and as his thick, dark hair had grown rather long, it gave him somewhat of the look of a painting that was famous a few years ago, called the Neapolitan Boy.

"Sure, I'm working for Nick Carter," repeated Philip, realizing that a denial would do him no good, and that the only safe course for the misleading of the ideas of Pete consisted in guying him. "Want to hear all about it?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was this way. When I was in Russia, I was calling on the czar one day when who should walk in an' stick his feet against the edge of the mantel, but Nick Carter; and says he to me, says he——".

Pete's eyes began to glitter dangerously. He was a very much larger boy than Pommery—bigger and stronger and older. He knew that the boy was guying him, and he didn't like it, and so, suddenly, without the slightest warning to his companion, he raised one hand and struck him a resounding slap with the flat of it, across the cheek.

The force of the blow turned Philip half around, and it brought tears of pain and rage to his eyes.

Doubtless Pete supposed that the slap would be all that would be required to silence Phil and to teach him that he must not guy his superiors, but in that he was mistaken.

No sooner had the blow landed on the boy's cheek than he turned and leaped upon his assailant, and he did it so quickly that Pete was in a measure taken by surprise—and the onslaught was so sudden that the larger boy was borne to the pavement.

Philip's fists lost no time after that.

Biff biff-bang-bang-bang! they fell, beating a sort of devil's tattoo upon Pete's face and nose.

The set-to happened almost directly in front of the World Building, where narrow Frankfort Street is turned into a newsboys' thoroughfare at certain hours of the day and night, and it was at an hour when the neighborhood was rather crowded.

In an instant a crowd had gathered around the combatants, forming a ring that was dozens deep on every side, and everybody struggling to get nearer to see the fight.

When Philip had punched Peter a score or so of times, he desisted, and then, with a little contemptuous smile in his eyes, he leaped to his feet away from his enemy, and would have dodged away and disappeared if the crowd had permitted it; but no. He was held

where he was, and in another instant Pete was on his feet as full of fight as ever.

Naturally, he supposed he would have an easy victory over the smaller boy, now that he was on his feet again, but when he squared off and swung his arms, something after the manner of a windmill, Philip, who had discovered that he could not escape, and had therefore turned to face his enemy, cleverly dodged inside the other's guard, and planted two quick punches, one with his left and the other with his right, the first on Pete's ear and the second on the point of his jaw.

The blows fell like small trip hammers, and Pete fell like a beef.

The wallop on his jaw was altogether too much for him, and he felt as if the earth and the sky had somehow come together with his head between them.

When he struck the pavement, too, his head struck first, and he thought it was right and that the world had suddenly become filled with shooting stars—and it all seemed so funny and so unusual that he thought he'd rest there where he was and think it over.

The crowd simply yelled in its delight. Then, as if by common consent, it opened a passage for Pommery to pass through, and one man patted him on the back as he passed and squeezed a dollar into his hand, while he whispered:

"You're a dandy crack-a-jack, kid. Come over to the Australian A. C., in Williamsburg, when you want to talk business. I'll give you a job that'll pay you better than fighting sweeps like that big duffer."

Pommery thanked the man and continued on his way; and then, when he had got clear of the crowd, it occurred to him that some of the fellows might think he was running away, and he stopped and waited.

The crowd melted away, and through it he saw Pete struggle to his feet, wipe the blood from his nose, and feel of his jaw to see if it was still fast to him; and then he saw him do another, and a rather strange thing, under the circumstances.

Pete, having ascertained that the top of his head had not taken wings and flown away, put his fingers to his lips and sounded a shrill, peculiar whistle, and this he repeated three times.

Just as Phil was wondering what he had done that for, he heard an answering whistle from farther down Frankfort Street, and then another from behind him, along Park Row; and after that there were several others, five or six, he thought, from different sections of the street around him.

"That sounds mighty like a signal," said Philip to himself. "Pete's calling his friends. I wonder if he thinks he needs the whole population of Park Row to help him lick a little feller like me? Sounds like it. Well, I reckon I'll move along or the first thing I know little Phillie boy will be getting it in the neck."

He moved up the street as far as Perry's drug store, and then, perceiving that the window afforded rather a good mirror, he stopped and focused his eyes upon the changing reflection.

He could see Pete on the corner, and as he discovered him, he saw that two other boys—strangers to him they were, too—approached his late adversary, and that the three whispered rapidly together, while Pete pointed openly in his direction.

"Blowed if he ain't setting his dogs on me, or something mighty like it," muttered Phil. Then he turned, placed his back to the window, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and fixed his eyes squarely upon the trio at the corner.

"Wouldn't wonder if I could do the whole bunch if they get me riled enough!" muttered the lad. Then, with a scornful toss of his head, which he knew that Pete saw, he wheeled and went toward the bridge, not deigning to turn his head and look behind him again.

It would have been better had he done so, for no sooner was his back turned than three other boys joined the three who were already together, and a moment later they separated, and if Philip had been looking, he would have seen that each one of the six was watching him as they moved away, and that four of them darted ahead so that they might, in effect, surround him.

He was to learn presently, and all too soon, what those maneuvers meant, for they portended an unusual and a thrilling experience for Nick Carter's youngest assistant.

## CHAPTER II.

### SWIPES, THE TERRIBLE—ASSAULTED IN THE DARK.

Philip continued on his way up Park Row until he arrived at the corner of New Chambers Street. There he turned into William, and, having threaded his way through the labyrinth of trucks and horses which seem to be perpetually loading and unloading along that thoroughfare, he reached the point that is directly underneath the Brooklyn Bridge. There he turned eastward along the path that is directly under the bridge, for he had an errand in Pearl Street, and the way he chose was the shortest cut to his destination.

But Pommery Sec was destined not to do his errand that day.

He was halfway down the path toward Gold Street, when, as if by magic, almost a score of boys seemed suddenly to materialize out of the empty air and to rush down upon him.

Before he even realized that he was attacked, he was seized from behind and his arms pinioned so that he could do nothing to defend himself.

Then, while they held him so that he could not move, the boys gathered closer around him and all began to move, as if upon a prearranged plan, down the street in the direction of the East River.

It was, without doubt, a genuine case of adbuction, taking place in a public and frequented thoroughfare of New York City, under the eyes of every passer-by, and yet totally unseen and unnoticed.

Who pays attention to what a lot of boys are doing at such times, and in such places? Nobody. Their acts are attributed to mischief, even though in fact there may be villainy afoot. If there were men along the street at that time who saw the crowd of a dozen or more boys hustling another down the street, they devoted no more than a glance to the incident, and straightway forgot it.

Pommery knew, the moment he was seized, that there was something deeper afoot than he had calculated upon.

He recalled the signal whistling between his enemies, after he had thrashed Pete Morgan, and he felt that he understood now what that signaling had portended.

Nevertheless, he disdained to cry out for help. He doubted if it would come to him even if he did so. He was aware of the view usually taken of the escapades of boys in the street by men who were passing, and he sized up the situation with the mental remark:

"If this is my medicine, I'll swallow it without a yap."

The one thing that surprised Pommery when he had time to think things over, and to a certain extent to observe his captors, was that Pete Morgan was not among them, a fact that was even more surprising still, was that there was not one among the fellows who had captured him whom he knew, even by sight.

They were none of them boys who belonged around the region of the City Hall—and he noticed also that they were older than the average age of the boys he knew best.

However, they did not give him much chance to observe them, for they hustled him along with considerable haste.

Once he protested.

"What are you fellers up to?" he demanded. "What's your game?"

"You'll find out—when you find out," was the retort. "Keep yer mouth shut, now. We don't want any guff, sonny."

"Well, I'm not going to stand very much of this sort of thing," insisted Pommery.

"I told you to shut yer jaw," retorted the boy who had spoken before. "If you don't want it smashed in for you, you had better take my advice."

"Well, I want to know where you are taking me," insisted Pommery.

The reply this time was a savage blow against his cheek, delivered with force sufficient to knock his head to one side.

"You're a lot of duffers and cowards, that's what you are," said Philip, angrily. "If you'll let me loose I'll fight any two of you——"

A second blow on the other side of his head convinced him of the wisdom of silence, and he said no

more, while his captors continued to walk him toward the river in grim stillness.

When they were almost at the river's edge, they halted, and the boy who had done the talking before, stepped in front and facing him, said:

"Pommery, you're up against it, and you're up against it hard, don't forget that."

"Oh, am I?" asked Philip.

"Shut up. Don't try to be smart. Don't talk. Listen."

"Well, I'm listening."

"You're up against it hard."

"You said that before. I heard you."

"It's up to you if you pan out all right and don't get hurt. If you do get hurt it'll be your own fault."

"It'll be my fault that somebody else gets hurt, if you let me loose for a minute."

"Drop it, Pommery. I ain't fooling. I'm in dead earnest. All you've got to do at the present moment is to listen to what I've got to say. If you utter another word before I give you permission to speak, you'll get a tap on the head with this," and he held up for Phil's inspection, a section of insulated cable—a most dangerous weapon, which will knock a man senseless and leave no mark of the blow behind it.

"We ain't fooling with you, Pommery. You'll find that out before we get through with you, and you may as well take it for granted now."

"I'd like to ask a question," said Philip, quietly.

"Well, what?"

"If you are not fooling with me, what are you doing?"

"You'll find that out soon enough."

"Well, where are you taking me?"

"That's what I was going to tell you. We're going to take you aboard of a boat that is lying at the pier down here. It's a canal boat that runs by steam, and the cap'n is a friend of ours. When we get you aboard the boat we's going to have a talk with you, and if you answer the questions we ask you and answer them all right, why! there won't be any trouble for you or for anybody else—see?"

"I reckon I see all right."

"Well, that ain't all. When we go out on the pier to get on the boat we've got to let go of you, maybe. That depends whether somebody will be watching us too close or not. Now, I want you to understand that if we do let go we ain't going to let you get away. If you take any chances on doing that, you'll get hurt so it'll last. I'll lay you out with this little cable before you have taken two steps, and I'll do it if I go to prison the next minute. If you go quiet and don't make any breaks nothing will happen, if you don't take my advice and act upon it, something will happen that'll be mighty bad for you—see?"

"Yes, I see."

"Do you think you'll go along all right, too?"

"I reckon so."

"Don't you know who I am, Pommery?"

"No. Who are you?"

"Ever hear of Swipes?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm Swipes. Maybe that will assure you that I won't stand for any fooling."

"Maybe it will."

"Come on, then."

Swipes gave a few hasty directions to his companions as to how they were to walk the remainder of their journey, in order to guard their prisoner, and then they continued on their way.

The name of Swipes had, for a moment, almost struck terror to the heart of Philip Pommery, for it was a name that was known and dreaded from one end of the city to the other among the boys who lived in the streets.

He was known among them as a young ruffian and villain who stopped at nothing. He had earned his name, and it was the only name by which he was known at all, in two ways, both from his unquestioned ability at "swiping" things without getting himself caught, and for the terrible force of the "swipes" he could inflict with his fists, for he was known to be as stout as a young giant, and as cruel as a tiger.

Swipes was a creature who is worth a short description. He was short and wide, but not thick. Indeed, it seemed sometimes as if there was no flesh at all on

his bones. He had a little, weazened face, a narrow, inquisitive nose, a mouth which, owing to the thinness of his lips, looked like a slit cut across his face, a chin that stuck out almost as far as the end of his nose, and which came quite to a point; bushy hair of a whitish yellow which grew over his head in a mass that looked like a sailor's swab, that grew down quite to the front of his ears, and even after that, seemed to keep on till it spread all over his face in a sort of fuzz; and in the midst of it all, two little ferret eyes, round, like beads; black, like jet buttons; piercing, like gimlets; fringed in white lashes, and underneath white brows till they looked like bits of tar dropped into a snow bank; and, more than all that, they were eyes which seemed never to wink, which looked at you with a steady, burning stare, like the eyes of a snake.

Swipes' shoulders were remarkably wide and bony. His arms were long, thin and wiry, and they possessed wonderful strength. His legs were short and they bowed considerably.

Lastly, the age of Swipes was a profound mystery. He might have been eighteen or thirty. Nobody knew and nobody could tell by looking at him.

Seen across the street among boys he would be taken for a boy as young as any of his companions. Seen near at hand, with men around him, he seemed not younger than they were.

But his face was full of wickedness and cruelty, full of badness, full of everything which should make it shunned by those who go about in the full light of day and who do not hesitate to look a policeman in the eye.

The certainty that he was in the power of Swipes, and the uncertainty of what Swipes intended to do with his power, weighed upon Philip's mind so that he made no effort to resist the fate, whatever it was, toward which they were dragging him, and he walked among his captors blindly and with apparent willingness down the street, across South Street and out upon the pier to its end.

There, lying against the wharf, was the steam canal boat to which Swipes had referred, and without hesitation the boys led him aboard of it, going aft to the hatch and then motioning to him to descend ahead of them.

This he did, starting down the ladder into the darkness, but ere he reached the bottom his feet were knocked from under him, and as he fell to the deck he was conscious that something was thrown over his head, and that a heavy object fell upon him, and then—unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER III.

### "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!"

When Pommery opened his eyes to consciousness again he was no longer in the dark, although a glance convinced him that he was alone in the cabin of the canal boat to which Swipes and his gang had taken him.

He listened, and could hear the chuck-chuck of the engine and the pounding of the propellor against the water, and he knew that the boat had been gotten under way since he was brought aboard of it.

He made another discovery also, which was not reassuring, and that was that he was bound so firmly that he could not hope to escape.

His feet were tied together at his ankles; another piece of rope was tied around his legs at his knees, and his hands were bound together behind his back. Then, as if all this were not sufficient, still another rope was passed around his waist, fastened firmly, and then carried to a ring in the bunk over the one in which he was lying, and there tied into many knots.

"Gee!" muttered Pommery. "I reckon they think I'm worth keeping. Wonder they didn't gag me! Boat's going, too. Wonder where? They must have wanted me real bad, they must. I wonder if that whole business was a put up job? Pete Morgan and Chris Conners coming across the street, and Pete slapping my jaw in order to get me into a fight. Anyhow, I walloped him to the queen's taste. By Jove! I've got it! I know their game now as plain as if it was writ on the wall there in letters of fire! Sure's you're born! Gee!"

He was silent a moment and then continued:

"Sure thing! That's why they asked me about Nick Carter. It's as plain as the nose on your face, Mr. Pommery Sec. Pete Morgan has joined Swipes' gang. Somehow the outfit has got on to the fact that I'm working for Nick Carter, and they have made up their minds that they are going to make use of me, somehow. I wonder how? That's what Swipes meant when he talked about my answering questions, all right. Huh! I reckon they'll find that Pommery Sec's a little too dry for them at that, before they get through with me."

For a while he remained silent, listening, but he could hear nothing but the steady pounding of the propeller against the water, and the thumping of the engine as it forced the wheel around; and so more than an hour passed by.

"I wonder if the chief'll think I have deserted when I don't show up according to promise, at six o'clock tonight?" he asked himself once, noticing by a little clock that hung at one end of the cabin that the time was rapidly approaching that hour. "I reckon he'll know that I'd be there if I could. It's funny that nobody comes near me here."

Fifteen minutes longer he waited, and then he shouted.

"Hello, there!" he called, lustily. "Where in blazes are you all, anyhow? Why don't somebody come down here and say 'Hello!' or something?"

Again he waited and again there was no response; and then, with a grim smile, he muttered:

"Bet a quarter I'll wake somebody this time."

He rested a moment in order to get his strength, and then, with all the strength of his lungs, he yelled:

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

It had the desired effect.

There was a rush of feet on the deck over his head, a hasty throwing back of the hatch and then a body, so big that it would scarcely pass through the opening, slid rather than climbed down the ladder; and Pommery, looking upon this strange apparition, burst into a hearty laugh which he could not have suppressed had he tried.

Never in all his life, not even in a museum, had he seen a human being so fat. He was like a balloon with a pair of feet stuck in at one end and a head fastened upon the other.

"Vere iss dot fire, alreaty?" he demanded as soon as he reached the floor of the cabin; and then, perceiving that there was no fire, and that the occupant of the bunk was laughing at him, he approached nearer, and with slow deliberation inquired:

"Vot iss funny, hey?"

But Pommery was still laughing and could not reply.

"Dot must be a goot choke, hey?" he continued. "Vas it fire vot you sait? Den meppy you feel petter bimeby if I giff you some leetle fire—hey? It vould pe too pad if you vas disappointed, hey, mine leetle frient—vot you call Pummery-sickem? I giff you von leetle fire, den meppy you not calls for any more, alreaty."

With easy deliberation the huge German lighted a match, and then while the sulphur was still sizzling upon it, he rubbed the end of the burning instrument against the end of Pommery's nose.

It inflicted, as everyone must know, an exceedingly painful wound, for the sulphur continued to sizzle and burn into the flesh after the match was itself withdrawn from proximity to Philip's nose, and his hands were tied behind him so that he could not raise them to defend himself or to solace the wounded member.

It stopped his laughing instantly, and he was on the point of crying out with pain and rage, when he suddenly remembered that he was entirely at the mercy of the fat scoundrel and that it would be best for him to bear what he had to bear in silence.

He shut his lips tightly together and almost held his breath, while he fixed his glance upon the pig eyes of his tormentor.

"You vant some more off dot fire, meppy, alreaty?" asked the German.

"No. I've had enough, thank you," said Pommery, calmly, although tears of pain were in his eyes.

"So? Goot! Ven you vant some more you sing out, hey? Und I pring 'em. You t'ought dot vas sehr funny ven I coomes by de hatchvay down, hey? Dot

fire call off yours—you vas a funny poy, hey Vas dot vat you vas schmiling so lout about, hey?"

"Oh, no," replied Pommery. "That wasn't what I was laughing at."

"No? Meppy you vas tell me, hey, vat iss it you vas schmiling about?"

"Why, I have been lying here wondering what it was that fell on me when I came through the hatch into the cabin. Something took my breath away when I struck the floor."

"Und you fount oud vat it vas, hey?"

"Sure."

"It vas me; I sot down on you."

"That's what I thought. Do you like to sit down on people and then come in on them when they can't help themselves, and burn their noses with matches?"

"Sometimes—yah—ven they laugh at me und call for fire because I'm fat. Does dot leetle spot on the end of your nose burn alreaty?"

"Like blazes."

"Vell, dot's nice, ain'd it? Meppy, bimeby you call for fire some more, hey?"

"No. I've had enough. I say, untie my hands, will you?"

"For vy?"

"So I can doctor my nose."

"I doctor him for you. Vot you vant? More fire?"

"No, no, no. Where are the fellows who brought me here?"

"De vot did you say?"

"Where are the boys who brought me here?"

"By golly! Did you think dot somepody brought you here? Dere vas nobody vot pring you here. You vas coome py your lonesome, alreaty, hey?"

"Where are you taking me?"

"Vere vas I tooking you? Vell, vell, vell! Vouldn't dot char you, hey? Vere vas I tooking you to, iss it? Vy, I vasn't tooking you to anyveres, vas I? You vas dere mit de punk, yelling fire und schmiling all ofer your face, und I vas here. Vot you driving at, leetle poy, hey?"

"Where is Swipes?"

"Schvipes? Who vas it, dot Schvipes, hey?"

"The fellow who brought me to this boat—Swipes. Where is he?"

"Ach! Schvipes! Yah, yah. Dot iss so! Schvipes."

"Where is he?"

"Vell, I told you. If you vas vait long enough, bimeby after a leetle vile, ven he gets goot und reaty meppy he told you vere he iss, himself, hey?"

"Won't you give me a drink of water?"

"Vater? Dere ain'd any on der boat. I giff you some bier—ven I cooms pack."

The strange fat man turned abruptly, hurried to the ladder with an alacrity that was astonishing in one of his mammoth proportions, and having mounted it with the agility of a cat, disappeared through the hatchway upon the deck.

The smarting pain which Pommery suffered from the sulphur burn on his nose was almost intolerable, and when he was again alone he turned and twisted in a vain effort to rub the wounded member against something to allay the pain; but there was no use. He was bound too securely, and there was nothing for him to do but to bear his tribulations in silence and await the coming of relief.

It was quite plain to him that his captors who had brought him to the boat had not remained aboard of it after he had been made a prisoner in the cabin. It was also plain that they were taking him somewhere, for some specific purpose, but whatever that could be, it was impossible for him even to conjecture.

But he was not long to remain in doubt.

Another hour passed, and then he felt the engines stop. Presently the wheel reversed and pounded against the water angrily. Then the boat bumped against a wharf somewhere, and he heard the sound made by hurrying feet upon the deck over his head.

For more than an hour he had been in total darkness, and he knew that night had settled down over the world outside the cabin.

The hour had come and gone when he was due to return to the house of Nick Carter, for he had been upon an errand for the detective at the time of the encounter in the street, that had ended so disastrously

and resulted in his capture and abduction by Swipes and his gang.

He was wondering if the detective would miss him and make any effort to find him when he should be really missing, when the hatch was thrown away again and a lighted lantern was swung for a moment through the opening.

Then, much to his astonishment, he heard the voice of Swipes- a squeaky, querulous voice it was- say, laughingly:

"Burned his nose, did you, Hans, when he asked for fire? Well, we'll burn his eyes out and cut out his tongue to boot if he doesn't make up his mind to listen to good advice- and follow it, too. Come on. We'll get him out of this. He will be safer in the cliff house."

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE CAVE OF THE CRIMINALS.

"Well, Pommery, how do you feel?" was the salutation that Swipes gave him when he descended, lantern in hand, and stood besides the bunk where Philip was lying, bound and helpless.

"I suspect that I'm feverish, Swipes; my nose is hot," replied Pommery, determined that he would not show the white feather in any sense of the word, from that time on; and also entirely decided that he would keep cool and permit nothing, no matter what might happen, to ruffle or disconcert him.

"Yelled fire, did you?"

"Yes. Wanted to find out who was here. You see, I felt sort of lonesome with nobody around to talk to."

"Hans gave you a little dose of fire, did he?"

"Yes. Hans is very obliging."

"Answered all your questions, did he?"

"Everyone -only he talked German and I couldn't understand him."

"Too bad, wasn't it? Well, never mind. Your eyes shall answer the questions for you before you are very much older. I suppose you'd like to have your hands and feet free, eh?"

"Well, I wouldn't mind, if you don't think you are afraid that I'll pick up this screw and run away with it."

Swipes grinned, but he made no reply. He took his knife from his pocket and one by one severed the cords that bound Pommery, and then, with his strong arms, he swung the boy around into a sitting posture on the edge of the bunk.

"Sit still a minute till the blood gets to circulating," he said. "I didn't know they tied you up so tight as all that. It wasn't necessary; but I guess it didn't hurt you much. How is that? Feel better?"

"Yes."

"Can you stand on your feet now?"

"I reckon so."

"Well, here's your hat. Get on your feet and follow me. Stop, though; I forgot something. Pete!" he called.

Pete Morgan replied from the deck above, and in an instant more came sliding down the ladder; but he did not look at Philip or act as if he recognized him at all.

"Hold the lantern, Pete," ordered Swipes. "I'll put the bandage on his eyes myself. When you did it the other day, you know what the result was."

He stepped behind Philip and in a moment more had bound a thick bandage tightly around his head so that every ray of light was excluded and the boy was as effectually blinded as if his eyes were put out.

"Now, Pommery, listen," he said.

"I'm listening."

"I'm going to take you ashore. You'll climb a few steps and go through some unpleasant places, only you won't see them because your eyes are blinded. When you get to the place I'm going to take you you'll be up against it for fair."

"Seems to me as if that was the case already."

"Well, it is; only not so much so as it will be later. You'll be asked a lot of questions. If you answer them all right, all right, you won't have a thing to fear, and you stand a chance of being made one of us."

"One of who?"

"You'll find out soon enough. I just want to say this to you for a pointer. We've heard some things about you which will make you one of two things to us."

"What things?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you, just for your own sake, before you go any farther, that you are in a position to be either a very valuable member to our little association, or you will make about the most handy corpse I know about."

"I don't pretend to understand you, Swipes."

"Well, you don't have to—yet. You will understand soon enough. I'm trying to do you a favor now and give you a pointer or two."

"Then try to be a little plainer, for I don't catch on worth a cent."

"Well, Pommery, if it is true what the fellows have been told, about you and Nick Carter, you stand a chance of ringing in mighty close to the chief and the council of ten—provided you have got good sense and are willing to do as you are told. And if it is still true that you are next to Carter, and you won't do as you are told to do, the crabs and lobsters will be nibbling around your pretty face and your singed nose before you are many hours older. A word to the wise, that's all."

Like a flash it all came to Philip why he had been captured and taken away.

He understood at last why he had been taken to the river, made a prisoner and brought to this place.

Here no doubt was located the headquarters of that mysterious gang of crooks of which so much had been whispered of late, but of which so little was really known.

Through some of the boys, these crooks had learned that he, Pommery, was in the confidence of the great detective, Nick Carter, and now they had made a captive of him in order to force him to turn into a spy, to aid them in their work and to betray the detective into their hands.

Pommery knew that Swipes was a desperate character, as unprincipled as he was deep, and he was convinced that the threats that had been uttered were not idle ones.

Nevertheless, as they led him up the ladder and out upon the deck of the boat, he felt his heart thrill within him, for it came over him suddenly that in a measure he represented Nick Carter himself at that moment. That all the reason why his enemies had made a captive of him was in the hopes that he would become a Judas and betray his master.

He wondered if they believed that they could think of terrors sufficiently awful to induce him to do such a thing as that, through fear, and he smiled to himself when he thought of it.

"They think they have got an easy mark in me, just because I'm a kid," he muttered to himself. "Well, I'll show them that even a kid can be too much for their kind; but I'll play their own game if I can. Maybe I can learn something that it will be worth while to tell the chief—if ever I see him again."

Still blindfolded, he was taken ashore and thence along the shingle of the beach for a considerable distance.

At last, however, they came to a stop, and then presently ascended some stairs. Then, Philip felt himself thrust into a chair in which he was strapped, and then, having been told to hold on tightly to the arms of the chair, he was swung into the air and he felt that he was ascending rapidly through the dark to some unknown height on the cliff above.

Then the chair swung in. Hands seized the rope and drew the chair into some recess. The straps were unfastened, he was bidden to stand upon his feet, and then, still blindfolded, he was led away along an ascending path which seemed to take him into a sort of cavern, judging from the coldness and dampness of the air around him.

Thus he was led on and on, making frequent turns, sometimes ascending, sometimes descending, often turning to the right, and frequently going off at a tangent to the left, and so, traversing what seemed to him to be an interminable distance, until at last he was brought to a halt and the bandage was removed from his eyes.

For a moment he gazed around him stupidly, almost unseeingly, like an owl that is caught in the glare of sunlight, for the room—or rather the amphitheatre in which he found himself—was quite brilliantly lighted.

if anything which is lighted by torches and lanterns can be said to be brilliantly alight.

It was a marvelous place in which he found himself. A glance told him that much—a wonderful place.

If a place should be hollowed from the middle of a mountain, shaped like a dome, or to be more exact, like a pineapple cheese, it would exactly describe the shape of the cavern in which Pommery's eyes were unbandaged.

Consider that place to be twenty-five yards in diameter and as many high, line it all the way around with granite rocks that are full of mica, and therefore glisten like myriads of diamonds when the light strikes them; make the floor of it a flat rock with a depression running through the center, and fill that depression with a silently flowing stream; cut a fissure into the mountain side, so that it extends away out of sight through the darkness beyond, and place that fissure at the upper end or side of the dome-shaped room, and another fissure-like at the lower side; puncture a long, narrow slot along the crest of the dome, not wider, in fact, than a man's hand, but nevertheless wide enough to permit smoke and dampness to escape through it, and you have some idea of the interior of the retreat to which the captors of Philip Pommery conveyed him.

With the bandage suddenly removed from his eyes, Philip saw all that has been described quickly, and while he was trying, apparently, to recover the use of his eyesight.

But he saw more than that.

He saw that he was in the center of a group of at least a hundred men, and he could hear voices around him which convinced him that there were as many more who were not visible to his eyes.

It was evident to him that they had been lounging about the place when he was brought in, and that they had pushed forward for the mere purpose of having a look at the newcomer; and as they pushed forward, many of them were still in the act of adjusting their masks to their faces, half masks which were only intended to conceal the upper part of their features.

Some of the men had already adjusted theirs before they thrust themselves forward; others had fixed theirs on so imperfectly that they afforded little or no protection; still others stood with theirs in their hands, as if they had either forgotten to put them on, or did not care to take the trouble: some were still in the act of adjusting them.

And all the while among the throng there was the murmur of hoarse voices, crude jests, vulgar expletives and laughter.

"Another coo-coo clockie, Swipes?" asked one of the jesters. "Do you think he'll strike the hour?"

"Where did you get the babe, Swipes?" asked another. "It'll be plumb ten years before he can raise a beard. But I say, old man, he'll make good bait, and Foxy and I are going fishing in the morning. Who is he, Swipes?—Prince Henry, of Prussia?"

## CHAPTER V.

### TAKING THE WRONG BOOK BY THE HORN.

It sometimes happens that the merest trifles of incident will startle us the most.

Did anyone of my readers ever have it happen to him that a stranger accosted him on the street and asked to be directed to that very reader's place of abode?

Such an experience is somewhat startling and rather disconcerting; but, nevertheless, such things do happen.

Just such an experience happened, in fact, to Nick Carter himself.

It was at four o'clock of the afternoon when Pommery Sec was so boldly abducted.

Pommery had been sent upon an errand by the detective, and he was to return and report at six that evening. In the meantime the detective had gone about other things, and one of them had taken him rather unexpectedly into the lower section of the city—in fact, in the same neighborhood to which he had sent the lad.

It so happened that Nick was arrayed in a disguise which he had not worn for a long time in the city of New York, but which, long ago, was quite familiar to the readers of these records; in fact, he was dressed in his one-time favorite costume of Old Thunderbolt.

You can see reproductions of the Old Thunderbolt character on the street almost any day. It is the man from the country. The middle-aged man with the shrewd eyes, the happy "you-can't-call-me-down" smile and the general free-and-easy, sauntering gate which the man who is accustomed to crosing fields and walking through woods cannot lay aside when he finds himself on the city streets.

He wore the wonderful coat with its detachable tails, its adjustable collar and its four-ply reversible patterns; that coat, with its inexhaustible pockets which were always kept filled with the necessary paraphernalia for many disguises and changes.

The hat, the trousers, even the boots he wore on his feet were masterpieces of art in the line of changing disguise, and it seemed almost incredible that one man could carry so many things to do with, and yet be unhampered by their presence. Nick Carter had made the statement many times that with the costume of Old Thunderbolt on his back, he could appear in twelve different characters in thirty-six minutes, and that he would defy any person to recognize anyone of them as one he had seen before, or as being the original of the twelve, the detective himself.

Last but not least he carried the inevitable gripsack, which was also a marvel in its way, and which had been through more campaigns with the great detective than any other single article of equipment he possessed.

And so, arrayed as described, with the gripsack in his hand and the inevitable straw in his mouth, he was standing on the steps of the Astor House, meditatively chewing the straw and otherwise appearing as if he had just crossed the ferry and had not yet made up his mind where to put up for the night, when the littlest kind of a little boy, with a small bundle of papers in his arms, ran up to him.

"Say, mister," panted the boy.

"Hello, sonny," replied Nick, kindly. "Now what do yew want, hey?"

"Do you know Nick Carter?" asked the boy.

For just an instant Nick Carter was genuinely surprised. If a grown man, or even a big boy, had asked him that question, he would have had a reply ready on the end of his tongue, but to have a little mite of humanity like this one ask him in that unconcerned manner—well, his instant thought was that some man near by had penetrated his disguise, or had thought he did, and that he had sent the lad to him to ask the question while he stood not far distant to observe the effect of it.

The pause that he permitted himself to make before he replied to the question was not long enough to have attracted the notice of any person, even if they were watching; then he wagged his head in a slow negative, and replied:

"Nope. Never heerd of no Nick Carter; but I know of a Tom Carter. He lives down on the Beaseley place. Just got married. Married a niece of mine. I say, sonny, air yew lost?"

"Lost—nothin'," replied the boy.

"Then what air yew askin' fur that air Nick Carter fur?"

"Cos I wanted to find him."

"Did somebody sent yew to me to ask that question, sonny?"

"Sure thing."

"Who?"

"The copper over dere on the corner. I asked him and he gave me the ha! ha! and then he pointed over here and told me to run across the street and ask you."

"Oh, I see. He thought I'd know, did he? Well, now, what did yew want of Nick Carter?"

"I only wanted to tell him that a friend of his'n had got into trouble. You see, sir, a lot o' kids surrounded Pommery Sec on the street just a few minutes ago, and they took him off somewhere, and I know they'll do him dirt 'fore they git through with him. Pom has been good to me. He's licked more'n one kid fur teasin' me, and when the fellers got him in tow I chased along and seen 'em take him to the river and put him on a boat. Then I told a big copper about it, and the copper only laughed at me and told me to grow up and get wise. Then I told another copper, and he wouldn't listen at all, and ther I told a man, and he told me to run home to mamma, and then I asked the copper over there, and he sent me to you."

"You're a good leetle chap, ain't you, now? Do yew know where that boat is?"

"Betcher life I do."

"Well, ef yew'll show me where that boat is I'll buy all yewer papers and give yew a quarter besides. Is that a bargain?"

"Sure thing. Come on."

The little fellow took Nick by the hand and started to lead him away, and as they hastened forward they talked.

"You ain't told me yet how you happened to ask for Nick Carter at all," said Nick.

"Pommery told me he was workin' for him."

"Do you know who he is?"

"Yep. He's a detective."

"And Pommery told yew he was workin' for him, eh?"

"Yep."

"Did he say anything else about him?"

"Nope."

"That's funny, ain't it? Say, bub, did yew know any of the fellers yew saw takin' yewer friend, Pommery, to the river?"

"I only jest knowed one of 'em."

"And who was he?"

"They call him Swipes."

"Swipes, hey? Say, bub?"

"Say it yerself; I'm listenin'."

"How'd you happen to know Swipes?"

"Cos I live in the same house where he does. He's thumped me around ever since I kin remember. It's down in Delancey Street. When my fadder was livin' Swipes didn't thump me so often, but now he don't do nuthin' else if he happens to see me; and it's all because I hit him in the eye oncet with a snowball; so's he had a black eye. Say, mister?"

"What is it, bub?"

"The boat's gone."

"Well, maybe we can find out what boat it was. Just wait here, boy, while I go out on the pier. There are some men there and I'll ask 'em."

There were two men loitering on the end of the pier, and when they saw the seeming countryman approaching them they straightened up and exchanged glances with each other. Here they thought, evidently, was prey falling directly into their hands as if from the sky.

"Hello, Uncle John!" exclaimed one of them, genially, taking a few steps toward Nick, who was advancing toward him down the pier. "Are you taking in the sights?"

"Yep; one of 'em," replied Nick, looking straight at his questioner. "We never see nothing quite like you be, down in our parts. It don't take more'n a day there, to git that rosy red you've got on the end of yewer nose, an' I shouldn't wonder if yew've been the best part of yewer natural life gittin' that. Besides, yew didn't git my name jest straight."

"Is that so? What is your name?"

"Well, if yew wanter put the uncle afore it, es yew did jest now, yew'll hev tew say Uncle Josh—fur tew reasons. One of 'em is that when I'm ter hum I'm called quite a josher, and t'other one is that my cognomen is Joshua Juniper. Say!"

"Well, Uncle Josh, what is it?"

"Has there been a boat here lately?—one that ain't been gone long?"

"Yes; there was one that left the end of the pier about half an hour ago. D'ye know Hans Pretzel?"

"Who?"

"Hans Pretzel."

"No."

"Well, it was his boat that was here. I thought maybe you'd be looking for Hans. Come along to the end of the pier and I'll show you where his boat laid before it went away."

The fellow stepped forward and took hold of one of Nick's arms, and at the same moment his companion sided up on the other side and grasped the other one; and then, before Nick had ventured to offer a word of protest, they began to hustle him between them toward the end of the pier.

Moreover, at the same time Nick knew that they would seize the opportunity to go through his pockets.

It was the sort of thing that happens almost daily along the docks of the East River during the summer time, and [illegible] countryman

who has passed the age of alertness is likely to fall a victim before he knows it.

But this particular occasion was one in which the two river workers might have been said to have taken the wrong buck by the horn.

They had not taken three steps with their intended victim between them, when Nick stopped with a suddenness that suggested that he had collided with a brick wall. At the same instant he threw the upper part of his body forward and tripped both men with almost simultaneous exactness.

The result was entirely unexpected, for both men shot into the air, half turned and then landed sprawling upon their bellies on the dock.

## CHAPTER VI.

### NICK CARTER GAINS INFORMATION.

No sooner had the two men struck the planking of the dock than they leaped to their feet again, both cursing; and they turned angrily, and doubtless would have jumped bodily upon the supposed countryman, with the intention of giving him a good pummeling, but the moment they looked at him they paused, uncertain how to act.

The countryman was slapping his legs, dancing and laughing, as if he had seen the funniest thing of his life.

"By gosh!" he cried. "I wouldn't ha' missed that not fur a new litter of pigs. Say, boys, did yew stub yewer toes? Whew! Yew fellers kin turn summer sets tew beat spring crops, yew kin. Hurt yew enny, hey?"

Both men were altogether too mad to answer, but only one of them rushed forward, and that was the one who had done the talking when Nick first appeared on the scene.

With a cry of rage he sprang toward Nick with his arm raised.

But when the blow fell it did not strike the detective. It fell, instead, into the embrace of an iron grip which closed around the wrist, and with a cry of pain the man sank almost to his knees in front of the detective.

"Kin yew swim, son?" drawled Nick; "cos if yew can't yewer goin' ter be in hard luck right now. There yew go."

As he finished speaking he raised the man to his feet again, turned him half around and then, with a kick, sent him spinning toward the edge of the dock.

For the fraction of an instant the man seemed to hang, as if poised, on the edge of the dock over the water, and then, with a cry, he overbalanced and fell splashing into the water; and as he fell Nick turned toward the other man just in time, for that worthy, seeing the discomfiture of his companion, and already having made up his mind that it was no countryman with whom they had to do, had drawn an ugly-looking knife from its place of concealment and was already rushing forward with the weapon upraised to strike.

Nick took one quick step backward as the man rushed toward him. As he did so his right foot shot into the air like lightning, and the toe caught his assailant's arm exactly on the wrist.

There was a cry of rage as the knife flew high into the air, circled and finally fell into the water not far from the spot where the first man had gone overboard; and then an unexpected thing happened, for the man who had wielded the knife suddenly sank to the planks of the dock without a sound or a cry, and senseless, and a small, round stone rolled to the dock with him.

"I hit him jest where I aimed," said a voice from behind, and the little boy who had piloted Nick from the Astor House stepped into view.

"I saw him wid de knife," said the boy, "an' I let fly. I kin chuck one of dem round stones almost as straight es I kin see. Hope I didn't kill him, mister."

"No fear of that, my boy. His skull is too thick for that. Run back now to the end of the wharf where you were, and wait for me. I'll be there in a moment."

Leaving the senseless man where he was, Nick walked to the end of the pier and gazed over into the water, and he smiled broadly when he saw the man whom he had so unceremoniously kicked into the river,

clinging to a spike in the piling, while he called lustily for help.

"Yew was purty hot a minute ago, mister," said Nick, looking down at him. "Maybe if yew feel a leetle cooler now I might help yew up. Here," he added, and he leaned forward and lowered one end of a pair of handcuffs so that the man in the water could reach it, "you shove that onto one of your wrists and lock it there and I'll have you up here in a jiffy."

"Fly cop, eh?" said the man, but he obeyed the order. A moment later Nick drew him to the top of the pier and had fastened the other iron on his other wrist, and so that both hands were behind his back.

"Now you just wait a minute till I attend to the wants of your pal and then I'll talk to you."

The other one, he who had been knocked senseless by the stone, was just struggling to his feet, and a second pair of handcuffs was soon adjusted to his wrists.

"Now," said Nick, "you can sit there. We'll drop the country end of it for a moment. It's up to you whether you go with me to headquarters or I forget that I've seen you to-day. What do you say?"

"What you goin' to take us to headquarters for? We ain't done nothing."

"Well, we won't argue that. I have said it is up to you whether you go there or not. You can make me forget that I have seen you to-day if you want to. I'll keep my word. If you earn your liberty you shall have it."

"What do you want us to do?" asked the man who had been in the water.

"Talk."

"What's your name? What do you want us to talk about?"

"A little picnic excursion."

"Say, boss, what're you givin' us?"

"A pointer for you to talk about. Didn't you see a little picnic excursion come down to this wharf? Wasn't one of your friends of the party? Mind, I'm not asking any questions; it is for you to talk. If you want me to forget that I have seen you to-day, talk."

"Maybe when you say picnic party and mention a friend of ours, why maybe you mean a feller call'd Swipes," said the wet man, tentatively.

"Maybe I do."

"And some friends of his'n wot came down to make a little call on Hans Pretzel."

"Shouldn't wonder if I did," said Nick, smiling.

"Shut up, Mange," ordered the man who had been knocked down with the stone. "We both might as well go up to headquarters right now as to blow on Swipes. I'd as soon be up against McClusky as Swipes, I would."

"Maybe you would, Bill Bower," retorted Mange, "but I wouldn't. I ain't takin' no chances with McClusky, not if I can help it."

"And," said Nick, "don't forget that I have said that if you talk, and talk right, I will forget that I have seen you to-day, which means that you won't be taking chances with either one. But it's getting late. If you're going to talk, talk fast."

"Maybe you mean that the call they made was on the steam canal boat wot Hans navigates, which is called the *Jolly Drover*, and which sailed from this port a matter of an hour ago?"

Nick nodded.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, you know that wasn't really no picnic, cos the boys didn't stay. They all moseyed out as soon as they had made their call. Maybe you knowed that."

"Maybe I did. Go on."

"Well, as I said, they all moseyed out, so there wasn't no picnic after all."

"I guess we'll have to go up and see McClusky," said Nick.

"Well, look here, there can't be much of a picnic if only one feller stays aboard, can there?"

"Might be—later," said Nick, glancing keenly at his informant and winking solemnly as if to give the impression that he knew a great deal more than he really did about the subject.

"I don't know anything about that part of it."

"No?" said Nick. "That is unfortunate—for you."

"Well, I don't—nor Bill, either."

"Only where the boat went to," said Bill.

"You'd better start at the beginning and tell me the whole yarn," said Nick. "It will save time, and it will make things easier for both of you. I'm getting mighty impatient."

"Lookee here, mister fly cop," said Bill, shaking his head at Mange to warn him to keep still for a moment, "I don't know who you are and I don't care. Here's what we've got to say on the subject you're looking up, and all we've got to say, so you can take it or leave it."

"Let me hear it."

"Hans and the *Jolly Drover* came down the North River this morning early with a lot of stuff aboard of her, and there was a few fellers in the group. They scattered and went ashore, and Swipes was one of 'em. After they'd gone Mange and me went aboard and played pinochle and rushed the growler along with Hans. He cooked us some grub and we had some more cards and beer. Bimeby we heard Swipes a-callin' down the hatch, and while Hans went on deck Mange and me hid in the hold. Swipes brought a kid down to the boat, and he chucked him down into the cabin. Hans fell on him, then they tied him up in one of the bunks, and Swipes and the fellers wot came with him moseyed back to town. While Hans was gettin' up steam Mange and me lighted out, and that's all there is of it."

"Where was Hans to take the kid?" asked Nick.

"We don't know—either of us—so help me!"

"Which way did the boat go?"

"Around the battery."

"Did nobody go on the boat with Hans?"

"Only his nigger helper."

"Where did Hans come from this morning?"

"Nyack; at least that's what he said he did."

"Who was the kid they were taking away?"

"I didn't hear nothing but a nickname."

"What was that?"

"Pommery Sec."

"How often does Hans come here to this wharf?"

"Every day, almost."

"And he's got a black helper, has he?"

"Yes; that's all he keeps on the boat."

"What does he carry on the boat?"

"Freight."

"What kind of freight?"

"Well," drawled Bill, and he winked his eye slowly while he was speaking, "I ain't never took a good look at the freight, but if I wanted to see some of it I should manage to be around here to-morrow afternoon about three, cos I heard him say he was expecting a load about that time."

"All right!" said Nick. "I'm going to take those bracelets off you now, and if you'll take a word of advice from a stranger, you won't permit yourselves to be seen around these piers for about a week. You can go now."

## CHAPTER VII.

### A CONFEDERATED CRIMINAL TRUST.

When Nick returned to the shore end of the pier he found the boy still waiting for him.

"Bub," he said, "yewer a nice leetle kid and I like you. Yew throwed that air stone to beat the band, didn't yew, now, hey? I told you that I'd buy yewer papers and give yew a quarter besides, didn't I?"

"Betcher life."

"Well, here's seventy-five cents fur the papers, and the quarter. How's that?"

"Too much. Papers ain't worth——"

"Never mind, that's what I choose tew give fur 'em. Now, say!"

"What, sir?"

"I want yew to dew something else for me, and when yew have done it I'll give you another dollar. Is that square?"

"Betcher life."

"Yew said that Swipes lives in the same house with yew, didn't yew?"

"Yep."

"Dew yew s'pose yew could find out when he gits hum tew-night?"

"Sure thing."

"Well, when he comes hum and yew know he is hum—no matter what time of day 'r night it happens tew

be—yew run up to the corner of the Bowery and First Street. Do you know where that is?"

"Sure thing."

"When yew git onto the corner yew stand there and yell 'Patsy!' with all yewer might. Purty soon a boy'll come up to you an' say, 'Hello, Beeswax.' Then yew jest tell him what yew know about Swipes and yew'll git another dollar. Now tell me yewer name."

"Tommy Pond."

"Well, Tommy, don't forgit. Patsy'll be a-waitin' fur yew es soon es it's dark to-night, and he'll wait there till yew come ef it takes all summer. In the meantime yew ain't to tell nobody else about our agreement, Tommy."

"Sure, Mike, I won't."

"Now skip along, and don't forgit. Good-by, Tommy."

As soon as the boy was gone, Nick hurried to the elevated road and took a train uptown, and half an hour later he was ringing the bell at the door of the house of one of the most remarkable men that New York City ever produced.

Chief Inspector Thomas Byrnes has not been connected with the police force of the city for many years, but it is safe to say that he still is better informed about the criminal classes than any other living man, with the possible exception of Nick Carter himself.

But a few facts had come unexpectedly to the knowledge of Nick that afternoon which made him feel suddenly as if he would like to hold a short conversation with the great inspector. The questions themselves will develop the reasons for, as well as the wisdom of, that sudden determination on the part of the detective.

Nick was still in the garb of Joshua Juniper, but it was a disguise with which the inspector was familiar, and as soon as he saw Nick he laughed.

"Does me good to see you, Nick," he said, "even if it is in that dress. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm well, thank you. I'm keeping my mind on my work now, and trying the best I can to forget that there are such things as trouble in the world."

"What's up? What brought you here to-day?"

"Only an idea. Great aches from little toe-corns grow, so they say, and I am a believer in the theory that there are times when great cases from little clews develop; aren't you inspector?"

"Sometimes, although I'm not much of a theorist, you know. I leave that to fellows like you. And besides, Nick, I'm so long out of the business——"

"Well, this is something that happened when you were in the business."

"Oh! well, in that case maybe I can be of assistance."

"It happened when my father was alive—when I was a boy. I remember hearing you two talking together about it once. I can't remember the name of the case or anything about it save this: That there was a band of French counterfeiters came to this country and thought they were going to run things their own way, and in fact they did run them their own way as long as the government detectives tried to handle the proposition themselves; but when they called you and my father into the case something happened. Do you recall the case I refer to?"

"Certainly. What about it? I don't think there is a member of that gang alive to-day, so I don't quite see how it can affect any case you happen to have on hand."

"Didn't they have some sort of a retreat somewhere up the Hudson River?"

"Yes, up above Nyack."

"That's just what I thought. Where was it, and what was it?"

"Why, it had been an old quarry or a mine—I never did know just what—left over from Revolutionary days, I think. Whoever had worked the place had hollowed out an immense place in the solid rock. After that they had either put in a bigger blast than usual, or nature had rebelled—at least something happened, and both sides of the hole they had dug fell in, so that their tops came together and formed a regular cavern underneath. Then, as the years went by, earth and dirt collected on the top of the thing, trees grew there, and so on things kept collecting for long years to come until all evidence of that hole in the earth was obliterated. Somehow, the French counterfeiter stumbled on that place and made his headquarters there. It

was a den of dens, I tell you. It puzzled us for a long time. It was your father who finally found it, Nick."

"What was done to the den itself after you cleaned it out?"

"It was blown up, I think."

"Don't you know whether it was or not?"

"Well, I didn't see it done. It was out of my bailiwick, you know. The sheriff of that county told me that he would do it, and afterward he sent me word that it had been done. That is all I know about that part of it."

"Then it is possible that the place might be in existence yet?"

"Quite possible, but hardly probable, I should say."

"What was the name of that French forger?" asked Nick.

"Bouvier—Paul Bouvier."

"I thought so. Inspector, did you happen to notice the name of the man whom I took out of Crook's Dive? It was Bouvier. His first name was Jean."*

"He was the one who murdered—pardon me, Nick. Yes, I remember. It may interest you to know that Paul Bouvier did have a son, and his name was Jean. I never saw him, so I could not say if this is the same one. But even so, I don't see how the two are connected now."

"I'll tell you. It is not long since I was in France for a short time. While there I ran across a condition which I have reason to suppose is being duplicated here."

"What was that?"

"Organized thievery."

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

"That's old," he said.

"Yes: in one way: but it is new in the way I mean."

"Then how do you mean?"

"Why, simply that the professional crooks have organized themselves into a trust, if you can so abuse the word."

"A criminal trust, eh?" exclaimed the inspector, laughing. "That's a good one."

"A confederated criminal trust. Such a thing exists in France, although on a very small scale, and confined to the poorer classes of thievery. Here I think it exists on a larger scale, and I think I have unwittingly got on the track of it."

"How?"

"Well, through a chain of circumstances."

"Let's hear them. Perhaps I can offer a suggestion."

"During the last twenty-four hours I have had five applications from big merchants located in different parts of the city, to take up cases for them—cases in which each one has been systematically robbed, and, strangely enough, each one on almost the same identical system. These cases have been holding over for me till my return."

"I see. Well?"

"Remember, there are five of them and they are all merchants."

"Yes."

"This morning I received two calls from banks—one of them was downtown, the other is in Harlem. I have been to see both of them. Their cases are peculiar."

"How, peculiar? Bank thievery is always the same."

"These cases are different in that there is nobody concerned with the institutions whom the officials care to accuse."

"Pshaw!"

"Wait, chief. I have advised them to say nothing for the present. I have my reasons for doing so, of course, and the principle one is that the two cases are precisely alike. We won't go into the particulars about the robberies now; I will touch upon that later. The point that I want to make is the coincidence."

"Well?"

"This morning I received a letter from a produce broker who wanted to see me. I couldn't go, and instead of telephoning him to that effect I sent a new boy I have on my staff to ask him to call around me this evening. Later, I found that I could get to see him, and went, only to discover that he had not shown up at his office to-day, and later to learn that my boy

*See Nick Carter Weekly, No. 384.

had been kidnaped in broad daylight, and taken away on a boat that hails from Nyack—or near there."

"Ah! We're getting at it now, I see."

"We're coming to it—yes; but you haven't got the whole story yet."

"Well, go ahead."

"The broker, who did not appear at his office to-day, was kept at home by a blow on the head that he received last night, after he had sent the message to me. That's point one. My boy, Patsy, was attacked and knocked down in the street last night, and only for the fact that he had a pistol and used it, and also that somebody heard the row and ran toward him, he would have disappeared off the face of the earth also. That's point two. You see, I am taking them in an inverse ratio."

"Well, what is point three?"

"The murder of my wife, by Jean Bouvier."*

"By gracious, Nick——"

"Wait, inspector. Did you ever hear of a man named Swipes?"

"Swipes? Yes. He was the slickest all around crook I ever knew. He was killed in Hell's Kitchen, in 1887."

"Are you sure?"

"You can bet your sweet life I'm sure."

"Wasn't he mixed up with your French counterfeiting gang?"

"Yes, he was. He did five years for that, in Sing Sing."

"There's another Swipes in existence now. He might be anywhere from eighteen to forty years old—short, spare, broad, strong as a moose, yellow hair, white eyelashes, black eyes like a ferret——"

"Hold on. That's enough. Old Swipes to a dot."

"Then this one is his son."

"Without a doubt."

"Well, that is point four, for it was Swipes who assisted Patsy, and it was Swipes who abducted little Pommery Sec. Swipes was a pal of Jean Bouvier, and Swipes leases the barge or steam canal boat called the *Jolly Drover*, that has business up the river near Nyack. Her captain is a Dutchman named Hans Pretzel——"

"Hans Pretzel, eh? That's point five, Nick."

"How so?"

"Is he an enormous fellow, as big as a mountain and as quick as a cat with all his bigness?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him—yet. I will to-morrow."

"Well, when you do see him, look out for him, for if he is the Hans Pretzel I mean he is a dangerous fellow, and the only one of the original gang you referred to who is left alive. Hans Pretzel, eh? Look out for him, Nick, for he's a bad one to the core."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SWIPES.

When Nick Carter parted with the inspector he had been given a thorough understanding of the location and general arrangement of the rock-bound retreat to which Pommery Sec had been taken.

Although he had never visited the place himself, and had, in fact, almost forgotten its existence, he was now, thanks to the courtesy of Inspector Byrnes, quite prepared to find it without difficulty; and already he had outlined three plans—three which worked together as one—for his descent upon the place.

Some idea has already been given the reader of the character and location of the place, but in order to understand the working out of the detective's plans another word on that subject is necessary.

Formerly there had been two entrances to the place, one through the upper fissure, which descended from the top of the bluff, and another through the lower fissure, from a ledge of rocks which jutted out almost over the water of the river, and which had been partially concealed from view from the river by bowlders and brush that was arranged systematically for that specific purpose.

The years that had elapsed, however, between the raid made upon the place by Inspector Byrnes, when he was in office, and the present time, as well as the at-

tempt to blow up the den, which had in truth been made and was supposed to have been accomplished by the sheriff of the county, had altered the conditions.

There was still an entrance from the top of the bluff, but where formerly it would accommodate many men at a time and afforded a means of flight for whoever happened to be in the den, supposing them to be attacked from the river side, it now was only wide enough for one person to work his way through, and that must be done very slowly and with great difficulty.

On the river side, where there had once been a precipitous path down the face of the bluff to the water, there was now only one way to gain admittance, and that was by means of a sling lowered with pulley and blocks, from the ledge above. Hence, it followed that it was absolutely necessary that there should always be at least one man on guard within the place to lower the sling; for if one came to the den by way of the river and found then that he would have to enter by means of the upper fissure, he would be forced to travel around the bluff and back on the hills, a distance of three miles before he could get to the spot, which was really already within a few feet of him.

When Nick left the inspector he hurried at once to his own house, and from there immediately dispatched Patsy on his errand to the corner where he was to await the coming of the little lad—Tommy Pond—who was to bring information of the arrival of Swipes at his home.

Now we happen to know that Swipes was at that very moment in the rock den of the palisades. We know that he was there when the *Jolly Drover* arrived, and that he was on the wharf ready to receive Pommery and convey him to the den above, and we have already seen how they were received.

But it appeared that Swipes had more than one means of conveyance to and from the headquarters of his men, and one of them was a swift launch which could take him across the river in connection with the Hudson River Railroad, so that it was an easy matter for him to travel the distance between the city and the den within an hour.

And it so happened that this was precisely what he intended to do that very night.

When the men in the den got upon their feet and surged forward to take a look at the latest arrival and to comment upon his youthful appearance, etc., Swipes stated in a very few words the reason of his being there.

"Listen to me, you," he said, sharply, and in tones which, while not loud, reached the ears of every man in the den. "I sent this kid up here to-night because he is just now about the most valuable find we could make, if we can convince him on which side his bread is buttered, and make him realize that if he works with us he is safe, and that if he works against us he's got all through with life in this world.

"Now I'm going to tell you in a word or two who he is and what I want done.

"He's Philip Pommery, called Pommery Sec. He has managed to get next to our very dear friend, Nick Carter, and he is now working for Nick Carter."

Swipes was interrupted here by a howl that went up as if by common consent from almost every man in the place.

Two or three of them actually started forward, as if they would seize upon the boy and crush him out of existence then and there, but Swipes stepped between them and their intended victim and held up his hands.

"Wait," he said, calmly, "I've got something better than that to propose, and I haven't got time to talk about it now, for I must get across the river and back to New York about as quick as I can. I know you would all like to tear his heart out and all that, just because he is a friend of Nick Carter, just as every man here is a sworn enemy of the detective and is pledged to do him an injury if he can; but there is a better way than the one you would follow."

"Give it to us," they shouted. "We want to hear it."

"Well, I want you to take good care of this kid until I get back here to-morrow night. See that he has all he wants to eat and drink; be good to him. When I get back to-morrow night he shall be made to join us and duly initiated into our order, or he will be put up for bait, as Skinner suggested."

"Bully!"

"If he joins us and takes the oaths in due form we'll send him back into the city and he shall return to work for Nick Carter; but he'll be working for us all the time, and we will then be forewarned of every move that the detective is to make. Now do you understand what I am up to? I want a spy in the enemy's camp. I want to know what Nick Carter is going to do before he does it—that is, as long as he is able to do anything at all.

"That's all, boys. Remember, you are to take good care of Pommery till I come to-morrow night. Such of you as have something doing for to-night can skip out now whenever you get ready, only I want you to arrange so that not less than five of you shall remain here with the kid.

"For those of you who go out, don't forget the reward."

"We won't."

"Five thousand dollars spot cash to the man who brings me satisfactory proof that Nick Carter is a dead one. Good night."

Swipes wheeled then, and faced Pommery.

"You heard what I have just said?" he asked.

"Sure. I ain't deaf."

"Well, you needn't do anything about it now, only think it over."

"I can do that."

"You have got twenty four hours to do it in. You don't know much about me, do you?"

"Nothing, only that you are called the snake, behind your back."

Swipes smiled.

"Do you know why I am called that?" he asked.

"No."

"Because I'm so cold blooded. I'm going now. Remember if you decide to fall into my way of thinking, I'll line your clothes with money. If you don't, we'll put you up for bait, and fish with you. Look here. Let me show you something."

He seized Pommery by one arm and pulled him across to one side of the den. There he kicked aside a piece of carpet that covered something. Bending a much mutilated naked human leg. Pointing down upon it, he said:

"That is all that is left of the last man who didn't believe me when I said we would cut him up for bait if he didn't agree. Good-night."

* * * * * * *

When Nick returned to his home after leaving the inspector, and sent Patsy out on his errand, he remained quietly in his own quarters until after midnight, for he expected at every moment that the telephone would ring and that Patsy would inform him that Swipes was at home.

But it was one o'clock before the information was forthcoming, and then it was very unsatisfactory. Over the telephone, Patsy said:

"The kid has shown up. He says Swipes came in just now, but didn't stay a minute. Then he went out again. The kid don't know where, only he knows that Swipes won't come back again,—at least not to-night. He never does when he goes out at this hour, and with the same bundle he carried to-night. I think, from what the kid said in describing it, that the bundle contained burglar's tools."

"All right," replied Nick. "You can come home and go to bed now, Pat. I think I know where I can find Swipes."

Nick hung up the receiver and then gave considerable attention to the arrangement of his disguise, so that half an hour later when he went again upon the street, he exactly resembled an Italian organ-grinder, who has been out for a holiday and is therefore unusually well dressed for one of his station.

Then he crossed the city to Eleventh Avenue and thence he started northward. Presently, after he had gone two or three blocks north of Thirty-fourth Street, he turned into a narrow alley between two buildings, and so on out into a yard behind them, thence through a gate in the wall, and thence along other alleys and through other gates, and so on across other yards by a turning, winding, devious way so involved in turnings that no person not thoroughly familiar with the route could have hoped to follow it even in the daylight, and at last passed through a door into a deserted building.

From there he descended, first a stairway, and finally a ladder, and then he traveled another winding distance through sub-cellars and foundations until at last he cautiously opened an iron door into a brilliantly lighted room,—that is, it seemed to be lighted brilliantly after issuing from the black darkness without.

A man stood at the door who barred his further progress, but Nick made a sign which he recognized, so that he stepped back and permitted the detective to pass.

The room was situated far below the street, was big and square and was comfortably filled with men and women, who were smoking and drinking at tables around the place. At one end of the place was a raised platform where there was a piano, and where even then somebody was delivering an execrable song; and there was a bar, and all the accompanying appurtenances of such a place—for the place was in reality that notorious resort of a few years ago, known as Crook's Dive.*

When Nick entered the place, he paused an instant to accustom his eyes to the light, and then swept his glance hurriedly around the room.

Almost at once he discovered Swipes, who was seated at a table near the center of the room, in company with three others, and they were talking together very earnestly in whispers.

Nick approached the table where they were seated and having arrived at a point near enough so that by putting out one hand he could have touched Swipes, he stood like a statue, waiting for one of the four men to discover and speak to him.

Nor did he have to wait long, for Swipes himself discovered the supposed Italian standing at his shoulder.

"Well? What the devil do you want, Italy?" he demanded.

"Me wanta Signore Swipe. Iss data you?" replied Nick, imperturbably.

"Yes, I'm Swipes. What do you want? I'm busy."

"Man wanta you outside. Senta me in. Say if you no wanta come, say Bill Bower wanta you. Say twoa men dere. Mangea Compton anda Billa Bower. Saya more if you wanta."

"Bill Bower and Mange Compton from the dock, eh? What do they want?"

The Italian shrugged his shoulders.

"Wanta you," he said. "Now. Bouta boat; bouta boy. Bouta detective man. Bouta devil to pay fora bot wine—fora Pommery. Say you know. Me not know."

Swipes turned to his companions.

"Must be something in this," he said, "for the Dago couldn't know what he is talking about unless the men he has named told him. I'll go out with him. You wait here. Where are they, Italy?" he added, rising.

"Me show you. Come," replied Nick, and turning, he led the way across the smoke-laden room among the maze of tables and through the door into the darkness without.

Inside Crook's Dive, the three men who had been seated at the table with Swipes, waited, and waited vainly, for his return; but he did not return; and when the gray dawn of morning began to chase away the shadows of night from the streets of the city, the denizens of Crook's Dive stole away one by one to their lairs, like the rodents they were.

But Swipes did not come back, and if the three men who awaited him could have known that the supposed Dago was really Nick Carter in disguise, they might have guessed why he did not return to them.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE FREIGHT OF THE "JOLLY DROVER."

When the *Jolly Drover* was tied to the wharf in the East River the following afternoon and the round, fat figure of Hans Fretzel rolled forward from the stern toward the bow, almost the first face that his vision rested upon, was the weazened physiognomy of Swipes.

It was evident that Hans had not in the least ex-

*See Nick Carter Weekly, No. 384.

pected to see his boss there at that time, for he stopped and began to chuckle audibly, so that the fat on his body was shaken like a barrel of jelly.

"Vell, vell, vell!" he said. "Dot leetle baby boy vot I raise mit so much care haf realy coomed down by der boat to see his uncle Hans, ain'd it?"

Swipes made no response in words, but he scowled, and leaping aboard the boat, hurried aft toward the cabin, with Hans rolling after him as quick as a cat upon his great legs.

"Mine leetle poy is cross, hey?" he asked, when they paused together near the hatch; and for answer, Swipes opened his mouth slightly and pointed with one finger, as if to indicate that three of his front teeth were missing—and Hans, who really only got a glance at the spot, believed that they were.

"Haf you been fitting?" he asked, with a leer and a grin; and Swipes nodded.

"Und did the oder feller knock dot sweetness voice out off you, as vell as your teeth?" he asked again; and again Swipes nodded; but this time he added in a half muffled tone, as if it gave him great pain to speak at all: "A'most, Hans."

"By chimminy!" exclaimed Hans. And he slapped his huge thigh and burst into laughter—and he continued to laugh until he was suddenly brought to himself by a thump in the belly that made him grunt. Then the laugh turned to a roar of rage, and his huge arm shot out like a battering ram, and if the blow he struck at the head of his companion had landed, the man whom he supposed to be Swipes would have been put to sleep then and there. But it did not land, and seeing that, Hans broke into another laugh.

"Vell," he said, presently, "I'm glad I didn't hit you. Now vot? Who are de men on de dock mit you?"

"They're all right," replied Swipes, speaking thickly and leading the way into the cabin. "I've got some freight for you to take up with you this afternoon, Hans."

"Yah. Freight. Dot iss right, Schwipes. Ven will it be here already? Hey?"

"At three o'clock."

"Vot iss it?"

"Dry goods. Some wine. Some glass ware. Some other things."

"Not too mooch, hey? Do boxes not too heafy, hey?"

"No."

"Vell; den ve start avay by four, hey?"

"Yes; and I'm going up with you."

"Goot! Und vot you do now—right avay—hey? Meppy you sttay by de boat vile I go mit de town up for von halluf hour; hey?"

"Yes. Go ahead. Keep sober, though."

Hans did not wait for further permission, but started toward the ladder and in another moment was out on the deck and halfway to the plank; and Swipes, following him as far as the hatch and watching him, saw him disappear beyond the end of the pier.

The two men who had accompanied him to the dock were still standing where he had left them, and in response to a signal from him, they now clambered aboard the boat and hurried aft to where he was awaiting them.

"Where is the nigger?" asked one of them, and the voice sounded strangely like the voice of Nick Carter, while Swipes replied in a voice that was not at all like the one he had used in talking with Hans.

"He's forward, Nick. I saw him dive below through the forward hatch as soon as he had made the line fast. Hans is good for a full hour away, I think, so you will have plenty of time. Shall I go with you into the forward hold?"

"No. Patsy and I can handle the coon, I think. Come along, Patsy."

Swipes, as we will continue to call him, although we now know that he was not that individual, remained leaning against the hatch while Nick and Patsy, both disguised as middle aged laborers, went rapidly toward the forward hatchway, and he watched them until they disappeared from sight.

Ten, fifteen and at last twenty minutes passed, and he had started to walk toward the bow of the boat when the dusky figure of a negro appeared through the hatchway, and leaping upon the deck started toward him.

For just one brief instant he was not sure whether it

was really the negro of whom the detective had gone in search, or the detective himself; but he was quickly reassured by a low and hearty laugh.

"It is all done," said Nick, now in the disguise of a negro—of the negro who had been in the hold. "Come down there a moment. I want you to compare us and decide if I will fill the bill. Byrnes told me that Hans is a sharp old fellow whose only weakness was rum."

"Well," said the pseudo Swipes, "that's what he is after now."

"Sure. He is safe to be so drunk that he won't know anybody, by the time he returns."

They disappeared through the hatch and presently returned leading the negro, handcuffed between them; and thus they walked with him up the dock. They returned in a few moments without him, having delivered him over to a policeman who was in waiting for that particular job.

At a little before three o'clock Hans returned, and he was very drunk.

He was so big, so wide, so ponderous, that it seemed impossible for him to stagger, and yet he did not walk straight either. He seemed to tack, like a sail boat making way against the wind, and as he came down the pier he looked like a walking baloon.

By the time he had reached the boat, two teams drove upon the pier with trucks laden with barrels and boxes; and there were men on the trucks who immediately began hauling the things they had brought, upon the steam canal boat. Swipes sat near the cabin hatch, looking on placidly and puffing at his cigar; Hans stood amidships, staring stupidly at the operations, and swearing incessantly, and the negro remained at the fore hatch, doing nothing. Patsy was nowhere to be seen. It was evident that he had remained below out of sight, and intended to stay there at least until the boat was well on her way up the river.

None of the barrels or boxes were lowered into the hold. Hans, in the only effort he made to interfere with the progress of affairs, ordered the negro to open the hatch for the purpose of lowering them, when they first began to come aboard, but Swipes stepped forward and said there were reasons why he wanted them kept upon the deck.

"Vell," said Hans, "if you vant 'em on de deck, all righd;" and then the loading proceeded.

It was accomplished all but the last one of the boxes, when four men came down the pier together and approached Hans, who immediately seemed to call each one of the men by name and began talking volubly with them. While they were conversing, the negro managed to work his way along the deck past them until he was within whispering distance of Swipes; and then he said in a low tone:

"They must be four members of the gang who want to ride up on the boat. We don't want them with us. I'd rather let them escape than to run the risk of that."

"All right," replied Swipes. "I'll see to it." Then, when the negro had returned to his post at the other end of the boat, he called out:

"Hans! Come here!"

Hans turned, stared a moment in the direction of the voice as if to locate the speaker, and then, having laid his course, steered for it.

"Vell, Schvipes," he said, balancing himself ludicrously; "vat iss it?"

"Send those fellows about their business. I don't want them here."

"No? Vy? They sait dot you tolt 'em to go by de boat to-day. Dot's vot they vas hier for cos you tolt 'em."

"Well, I've changed my mind. Send 'em away. If they want to go up the river, they will have to take another route. They can't go by this boat."

"Vell," said Hans slowly, "meppy dot iss all righd—meppy you know your own pishness de pest; I ain'd got noddings to say about dat, but Chon Giddings iss dere, und he say dot you tolt him last nighd at de Crook's Tive dot he und Shorty Quinn vas to pring de oder two fellers mit 'em to-day und go mit you, und——"

"Shut up," ordered the pseudo Swipes. "Go and tell them what I have said now. If they don't like it, tell 'em to try to come aboard without my permission

and see what will happen. Somebody'll get hurt if they try that on."

Hans returned to obey the orders given him, and the negro and the white man, watching, could see angry gesticulations and hear a few high words; and once, one of the men called out in a loud and angry tone to Swipes; but he received no reply, and presently the four turned away and left the pier.

The barrels and boxes were all loaded on by that time, and soon the *Jolly Drover* was got under weigh. The lines were cast off and the tide carried her out into the river. The supposed negro went below to attend to the fire and work the engine, and Hans, still drunk, but with sense enough left to steer, took the wheel.

And so the bow of the *Jolly Drover* was headed down the East River toward the Battery, rounded it and swung into the North River, while the supposed Swipes still smoked his cigar near the cabin hatchway and kept a wary eye upon the river craft, on old Hans at the wheel and upon the barrels and boxes which rested upon the deck.

A steam canal boat is not a racer; nevertheless the *Jolly Drover* made fairly good time, and she was soon well up in the Hudson River, hugging the Jersey shore and speeding on her way toward Nyack.

The afternoon light had faded into twilight when she passed Nyack, however, and it was quite dark, when, half an hour after that, she swung up against a low pier which had been built in the river so that it looked more like a mass of drift wood than anything else.

Neither was the pier intended to tie up to, for when the *Jolly Drover* swung against it, instead of making lines fast to the timbers, an anchor was dropped overboard forward and aft to hold her in place.

When the craft was thoroughly in place, Hans approached Swipes.

"Vell?" he said.

"Go ahead," ordered Swipes, laconically.

"Do you vant to hoost up de hull pishness: hey?"

"Yes. Now."

"Sehr good," said Hans, and he returned to his post and sounded five short, quick notes from the steam whistle.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE INTERRUPTED MEETING.—THE FIGHT ON THE LEDGE.

Following the tooting of the whistle, almost immediately there appeared over their heads the long arm of a derrick, and soon pulleys and blocks were working.

Half a dozen men swung down with the tackle and the barrels and boxes were made fast to it, one after another, with marvelous expedition, so that in a very short space of time the decks of the boat were unlimbered, and everything that had been brought to the wharf in New York by the trucks, was raised and disappeared into the face of the cliff above the boat.

The man who was supposed to be Swipes went up before any of the freight was taken, and after that he directed operations from the top while Nick, as the negro, bossed things at the bottom.

Then, when the last of the boxes had been delivered and there was no more to send, and just as Hans was on the point of giving the signal for them to draw up the rope, Nick stepped up close behind him, and without a word of warning or a sound, delivered a straight-from-the-shoulder blow under the German's ear, which sent him in a heap to the deck, totally unconscious.

A low whistle brought Patsy from the forward hatch to his side instantly.

"Quick, lad," he said. "It was a sort of a mean blow to strike the Dutchman, but there was no help for it this time. We havn't got any time to fool away."

Handcuffs were snapped upon the German's wrists; another pair was locked on his ankles, a gag was thrust into his mouth and securely fastened, and then he was tumbled unceremoniously down the hatch.

Already the men above were shaking the rope impatiently for the signal to hoist, and now Nick and Patsy both seized it and in another moment were drawn whirling into the air astride of the last box that was to be hoisted.

When they arrived at the ledge and the men there discovered that the negro who worked on the boat with Hans, and another person whom they did not know at all, had come up on the box, they would have been

handled with little mercy had not Nick anticipated them.

"De boss done tole us to come up," he said.

"Rats! What does he want of you here?" demanded the man who would have prevented them from entering the cave. "And who is this fellow? We never saw him before."

"Call de boss," said Nick; and then he raised his voice and yelled: "Marse Swipes! Marse Swipes!"

A few words from Swipes served to arrange matters satisfactorily. The negro and Patsy were conducted into the interior of the cavern and given seats. Then one by one the boxes were dragged into positions assigned by Swipes, who seemed to know exactly how he wanted things arranged; and then, as he approached the center of the place, where there was a raised platform, the men who were there, fifty of them at least, all arose to their feet and formed a circle around him. At the same moment one of the men led Pommery forward and with a jerk, brought him into position in front of Swipes.

"There he is, Swipes," said the man. "He's been fed all right, as your ordered. To-morrow I'm going to use him for bait, but you'll find that you can't never bring him around to do the job you laid out for him."

Then a second man stepped forward.

"Shall we proceed with the regular order of business?" he asked.

"Yes," said Swipes; and he wondered what the regular order of business was, for he could not expect nor anticipate how directly that very order of business was to work into his own hands.

"Order!" shouted the man, who was known as Flashlight Skinner. "The Independent and Secret Order of Associated Crooks will now come to order. Observe the first rule, if you please. All those having arms of any kind concealed about their person will step forward and deposit them on the platform until after the meeting is over."

Fully a score of the men came forward and laid weapons of all kinds, from revolvers and knives to sling shots and brass knuckles, on the platform, and Nick and Patsy on the outer edge of the crowd, smiled when they saw that.

"Unfinished business and reports from other associations," continued Skinner. "Are there any reports to make?"

For a moment there was silence and then one of the members rose slowly to his feet.

"I suppose that is my duty," he said, "but I ain't got nothing to report for the reason that I ain't been outside of this place since the last meeting. 'Cause why? 'Cause I couldn't get out. But the Pickpockets Union and the Second-story Easies have promised me that they would come in, as I told you last time. We've got now the Bank Burglars Brotherhood, the House Breakers Syndicate which consists of three mobs in New York and one in Brooklyn, the——"

"Oh dash all that!" called out somebody from the rear. "Tell us something new. We've heerd all that before. The game's working all right. We've got our start. The other crooks'll be only too anxious to join in with us when they understand what we're doing. The only kickers I know about are John Giddings and Slanty Quinby gang, and they only object to being under the orders of Swipes. I move that we proceed with what this here meeting is called for. We agreed between us less than a month ago that we would exterminate the whole Nick Carter outfit; and that is what we are most interested in just now. It stands to reason that that thing has got to be done before the Secret Order of Associated Crooks can amount to anything, because you all know as well as I know that Nick Carter'll git on our trial afore long, and then there'll be something doing. He came mighty

near to knowing something when he rounded up Jean Bouvier in less than twenty-four hours after he got back to town. That of itself ought to teach you all a lesson. What I want to know is, what has been done and what is going to be done about exterminating the Nick Carter outfit. It didn't do us no kind of good to have his wife killed off, and I reckon it ain't done any more good to have this kid Pommery brought up here to be toasted or roasted or whatever you propose to do with him. If one of you brave fellers had run a sticker into him and dropped him into the river, I'd a said all right; do the same thing by his boss, but——"

"Shut up!" ordered Skinner. "Are you going to talk that way all night?"

"Well, Skinner, I'll allow that I'm going to talk that way till I'm through, and no bigheaded flashlight like you are, is going to stop me, either. I ain't got much more to say, and what that little is, is this: I was going to say that I wish that Nick Carter was here instead of the kid, so's we could tell him what we think of him, and then we could trice him up against a post and roast him over a slow fire."

There was a moment of dead silence when he ceased speaking, broken presently by a shrill whistle which seemed to come from every part of the cavern at once.

The men turned as if by common consent, to ascertain from whence came the whistle, and then there was a yell of rage from fifty throats, followed almost instantly by a dead silence.

One of the crooks—a desperate character—started to his feet and took one quick leap toward the platform, where the weapons had been deposited, but the sharp crack of a rifle crashed through the cavern and the man threw up his arms and fell in his tracks.

What the crooks saw—the sight which called forth those simultaneous cry of rage when they turned at the sound of the whistle—was sixteen men drawn up in two semi-circles there, and each of the sixteen held a Winchester rifle in his hands and that rifle was leveled straight at them.

And in the meantime, behind them, Swipes had smashed Skinner on the head with the butt of a pistol, and had quickly stepped forward over the weapons that were heaped upon the platform.

And then the negro came forward from the corner and stood facing them, smiling.

"You are up against it, boys," he said, coolly. "The first one of you who attempts to lower his hands, gets a bullet through him, and no questions asked. This is a little surprise that we arranged for the meeting of the Secret Order of Associated Crooks. You can't blame anybody but yourselves, because you hoisted every one of these central office gentlemen up here on to tackle yourselves -and one of the boxes you were so eager to get, contained handcuffs and foot shackles for all of you. Four of them will now proceed to fit the new jewelry upon you while the others keep you covered and I wash up."

The groans and curses that filled the air about that time cannot be recorded, but nevertheless, in a very short space of time, so rapidly did the central office men whom Nick had brought with him as freight, do their work, every man of the sixty-eight who were assembled there was manacled and helpless.

In the meantime Nick had washed the black from his face with cocoa butter, and he had removed the kinky wig he wore.

"Now, boys," he said, "Nick Carter is here, if anybody should ride up in an automobile to ask you about him. The meeting of the Secret Order of Associated Crooks will now adjourn without delay. It would seem that Swipes has fooled you, also."

They turned their heads in the direction of the platform, and then a general gasp of surprise went up from every pair of lips there.

Swipes had disappeared: Jan in his place, still a

smile of pleasure on his face, was a face which many of them recognized—the face of the writer of these histories—the face of Chick.

Pommery Sec flanked him on one side and Patsy, grinning to beat the band, was on the other.

"I reckon," said Pommery, to the man who had wished for the presence of Nick Carter in order that he might be tied to a stake and roasted, "that when you want Nick Carter around so badly another time, you won't mention the fact quite so loud, will you?"

Nick gave a few hurried directions regarding the lowering of the prisoners into the *Jolly Drover* and turned away saying that he and Chick would descend to the boat to receive them as they came down.

He had taken three steps toward the ledge when an unforseen incident occurred.

A huge body loomed above the edge of the cliff and with a spring, reached the top.

Then it pulled itself together and bounded forward like a rubber ball, so that in one second of time from the instant when Nick turned toward the ledge, he found himself seized and engaged in a deadly hand to hand struggle with Hans Pretzel.

It was a terrible struggle while it lasted—but it was short.

The huge arms of Hans shut themselves like iron bands around Nick Carter's neck and body, and the great weight of the big man was thrust down upon him as if to crush him to the earth.

For a moment it seemed as if Nick must succomb to the awful weight and gigantic strength of the big German; but then, by one of those supreme efforts which he rarely had to use, he pulled his own mammoth muscles into trim.

While the weight of the German seemed to be bearing him down, he was stooping still lower and in a moment more he had raised himself erect, so that the German was lifted clear of the floor.

Then, the detective, with the huge man almost on his shoulders, started almost on a run toward the edge of the ledge, and when he arrived almost there, he halted with the same suddenness as if he had collided with an impassible barrier.

The shock of that halt was too much for the equilibrium of the German.

He shot into the air over Nick's head, dropped upon the very edge of the rock, and then, with a cry that rang through the cavern so that all remembered it, he rolled off into the abyss beneath.

So ends the story of the meeting of the Independent and Secret Order of Associated Crooks in the cavern that had once been occupied by the French counterfeiters.

Swipes was of course already a prisoner in the house of the detective in New York. He had fallen so readily into the trap laid for him at Crook's Dive that he was captured with little trouble.

Pete Morgan and Chris Conners were among the prisoners taken at the den in the bluff, and they went with the others to prison; and Pommery was sent the next day to look up little Tommy Pond and to arrange for him to go to a good school where he could have the advantages that his courage and his sagacity had earned for him, at the hands of Nick Carter. We will hear from Tommy Pond later, for although he was only nine years old when this event happened, he lived to take part in many that were greater.

It is worth while adding that while Hans Pretzel fell a great distance and struck upon jagged rocks at the bottom, he was not killed. He was taken to a hospital in New York, and left there to be cured.

THE END.

The next number of the Nick Carter Weekly will be No. 386. The title of 386 is rather an unusual one which has a peculiar significance in connection with the story that is told. It is "When Aces Were Trumps; or, A Hard Game To Play." It tells more about the career of Swipes and his many gangs of crooks, for while there were so many arrested who were connected with the Secret Order of Associated Crooks, the root of the thing was not destroyed. So we will have occasion to encounter Swipes and Hans Pretzel again before we are through with "When Aces Were Trumps."

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